In these projects, we made gender an explicit topic for class discussion through which the children could consider the visual culture that they enjoy as not simply entertainment but entertainment with gender implications.

Untangling Gender Divides Through Girly and Gendered Visual Culture

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The rise of girly culture has brought new dimensions and challenges to art education. As art educators, we are concerned about what we can do to meaningfully understand and educate children—girls and boys—growing up with girly culture. To this end, this paper presents our exploratory study, utilizing the methods of literature review, focus group discussion, and classroom observation, and findings on the following: (1) discourses of girly (visual) culture specifically related to age metaphor, visual representations of sexuality, and girly aesthetics; (2) postfeminist conceptualizations, critiques, and justifications of gender divides manifested through girly visual culture; (3) preadolescent children's perceptions of gendered visual culture and gender divides; and (4) gendered visual culture projects and pedagogical strategies for fostering gender-inclusive, playful, and empowering learning.

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Frilly dresses, pink accessories, and Disney Princess lunch boxes: such signifiers of girly culture are omnipresent in our children's everyday lives. Possessing a distinctive aesthetic and ethos, girly culture accentuates little-girl-like cute and feminine appearance, design styles, behaviors, and speech, further separating the conceptions and visual representations of *girl* from those of *boy*. This renewed, 21st century gender divide has reinforced gender-based artistic trends and products corresponding to a specific sex and gender identity. Floral prints and curvy lines characterize feminine designs while motor vehicles and sports imagery characterize boyish patterns and children's bedrooms are adorned with gender-coded color schemes (Paoletti, 2012; Wardy, 2014). These gender divides raise critical social issues about perpetuating gender stereotypes, gender inequality, and oppression of certain gender identities and expressions. Feminist visual culture researchers (Bae, 2011; Hains, 2012; Ivashkevich, 2009; Ringrose, 2013) have observed that girly culture within the context of today's Western girlhoods is packed with contradictory and contested ideologies surrounding gender equity, gendered knowing, individual agency, femininity, masculinity, sexuality, body image, and gender roles. Nonetheless, girly culture and ethos continue to gain popularity among girls.

As art educators, we are concerned about what we can do to meaningfully understand and educate children - girls, boys, and gender fluid - growing up within girly culture. Informed by Keifer-Boyd's (2003) article on gendered cultural stereotypes, we recognize that girly visual culture is a part of *gendered* visual culture; that is, issues associated with girly culture should not be perceived as *girl-only* issues but as issues concerning every child. Therefore, while focusing on girly visual culture, we have also situated our concerns and study within the broader context of gendered visual culture. We believe that it is crucial to first acquire an in-depth and critical understanding of girly (visual) culture and the associated issues of gender divides. We then can justly propose visual culture-based pedagogical strategies to overcome the gender divides. To this end, we embarked on an exploratory study (Stebbins, 2001), utilizing the methods of literature review, focus group discussion, and classroom observation, to specifically investigate girly visual culture, gender divides, and gendered-visual-culture pedagogy. This paper highlights our key explorations of and findings on the following: (1) discourses of girly (visual) culture specifically related to age metaphor, visual representations of sexuality, and girly aesthetics; (2) postfeminist conceptualizations, critiques, and justifications of gender divides manifested through girly visual culture; (3) preadolescent children's perceptions of gendered visual culture and gender divides; and (4) gendered visual culture projects and pedagogical strategies for fostering gender-inclusive, playful, and empowering learning.

Girly Visual Culture: Age, Sexuality, and Aesthetics

What is girly visual culture? Drawing from our review of the literature focusing on girl culture (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2008), girly visual culture (Orenstein, 2011; Radner, 2011; Wardy, 2014), gendered material culture (Paoletti, 2012), girl power (Hains, 2012), and girlhood studies (Ringrose, 2013), we find three recurring and contested discourses in the description and analysis of girly (visual) culture: age metaphor, visual representations of sexuality, and girly aesthetics.

Age is a vital yet contradictory metaphor in girly (visual) culture. While the word *girly* conjures up an image of a young preadolescent girl, girly culture is embraced by and exists across a broad range of age groups. Baumgardner and Richards (2010) define *girlies* as follows:

> Adult women, usually in their mid-twenties to late thirties [...], whose feminist principles are based on a reclaiming of girl culture (or feminine accoutrements that were tossed out with sexism during the Second Wave), be it Barbie, housekeeping, or girl talk. (p. 398)

Girly visual culture capitalizes on images of little-girl-like innocence, purity, and vulnerability, in turn portraying women in a submissive and non-threatening way. For example, in her analysis of the *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* movie, Stasia (2004) argues that while Lara's "youthfulness is played up through costuming,

she is also infantilised through her relationship with her father (Jon Voight), whom she calls 'Daddy'" (p. 177). In this way, girly visual culture also emphasizes childlike girlish behaviors and speech, which portray the strong and intelligent action heroine, Lara Croft, as simultaneously obedient, unthreatening, and normatively feminine to her father and to the majority of viewers, who are men. While women embrace and deliberately perform girliness, girly visual culture paradoxically prompts young girls to experience a Kids Getting Older Younger (KGOY) phenomenon. Radner (2011) argues that as "a feminine ideal" (p. 4), girly visual culture welcomes products that help to construct traditional femininity, such as makeup, high heels, nail polish, and sexy clothing. Young children experiencing girly culture have also become consumers of these products. Using children's beauty pageants, sexualized dolls, and flirtatious female celebrities as examples, Orenstein (2011) and Wardy (2014) criticize these types of ready-made, mass-produced, and consumeristic girly visual culture targeted at young children for creating an age-compression KGOY phenomenon that has taken children away from their innocent and creative childhoods too early.

Sexuality is ubiquitous in girly visual culture. Baumgardner and Richards (2010) and Radner (2011) underscore girly culture's reclamation and re-appropriation of female sexuality Girly culture proponents advocate that liberated women should be proud of their gender and sexuality, positively embrace traditional femininity and feminine appearance, and establish girly or girl-only friendships in which to share their intimate thoughts about sexuality and romance in a playful and nonjudgmental way. Radner's (2011) analysis of the iconic girly film *Sex and the City: The Movie,* Orenstein's (2011) critique of Disney princess paraphernalia, and Ivashkevich's (2009) detailed account of two preadolescent girls' talk and drawings illustrate how girls' friendships are built upon playful girly talk of romance, jealousy, sex/sexuality, boys, and marriage. Feminist critiques of such girly ethos frequently challenge the overt sexualization of young girls and girlhood, objectification of the female body, problematic body projects (e.g., unhealthy dieting practices leading to eating disorders, extreme or excessive plastic surgeries), sexualized and heterosexist children's toys, and narcissism enhanced by an obsession with perfecting one's self-image (Genz, 2011; Ringrose, 2013; Wardy, 2014; Weber, 2011). For instance, Wardy asserts that girly girls' scant or tight clothing, which reveals their body shapes, is often in contrast with boys' casual or loose clothing, which conceals their bodies. In her view, this fashion trend not only reveals a gender divide in fashion styles but also encourages objectification of the female body for male pleasure.

Visual representations of girls and girlhoods permeate girly culture and produce distinctive girly aesthetics. As described by Hains' (2012) research on girl heroes and beauty, Ivashkevich's (2009; 2011) accounts of preadolescent girls' drawings, Orenstein's (2011) and Wardy's (2014) critiques of princess culture, Paoletti's (2012) history of children's fashion trends, Weber's (2011) analysis of proper female styles and manners, and Weida's (2013) review of feminist zines, girly aesthetics employs gender-specific elements of art and design principles, feminine patterns, cuteness, Do It Yourself (DIY) creativity, and traditional middle-class ladylike beauty. Wardy and Hains specifically identify a number of feminine elements of art, patterns, and symbols culturally signifying femininity such as soft shades, pastel colors, floral patterns, curvy lines, scripted or handwritten letters, butterflies, knee-high stockings, pigtails, and high heels. Gothic and bad-girl styles combined with hypersexualized outfits are also popular among girls. Paoletti maintains that around 1985 the availability of gender neutral clothing decreased and that gender-specific colors and embellishments, especially the trend of pink for girls and blue for boys, increased as a neoliberal commercial strategy aimed at expanding the fashion market by discouraging the sharing and reuse of girls and boys' products. According to Hains and Weida's research, girly culture embraces the ideas of identities-constantly-under-construction, individual narratives, multiplicity, and multimodal ways of knowing, which resonate with DIY aesthetics of assemblage, contemporaneity, individual creativity, and self-efficacy.

Girly aesthetics also manifests through embodied experience. From cosmetic products and sexy clothes to special diets and extreme makeovers, girly culture considers one's own body as an aesthetic project incessantly under construction and scrutiny, and as a commodity requiring a feminine packaging as seen in *Sex in the City*, Barbie or Bratz, and makeover and beauty pageant competitions. Through analyzing *American Princess* (Seasons One and Two, 2005–2007), a makeover reality competition show aimed at improving manners and etiquette of the young contestants who were described as "unruly" or "incorrigible" and often represented working-class women, Weber (2011) observes that in each manners makeover project, "the class-specific designation of 'lady' or 'gentleman'—or in particular of 'princess'—is *a priori* understood as a recognizable, desirable, and achievable identity location" (pp. 136-7). Likewise, Orenstein's (2011) critique of child beauty pageants reveals young children's experiences with body aesthetic projects, including learning to talk and walk like a *lady*, dressing in sexy clothes, and practicing adult-like blowing of kisses and affectionate smiles. These examples indicate that girly aesthetics concerns not only feminine fashion styles and appearance but also lady-like manners cultivated within a particular socio-economic class.

Girly Visual Culture and Gender Divides: A Postfeminist Justification

Drawing on scholarship in postfeminism, Ringrose (2013) explains three ways in which postfeminism has been employed to explain, critique, and/or defend girly visual culture and the gender divides therein. First, postfeminism is perceived as a new feminist theory aligning with the contemporary postmodernist theory. As a new theory, postmodern postfeminism can contribute to a timely understanding of girly culture that echoes the desires and struggles of today's girls within their sociocultural, material, and economic realities. Genz and Brabon (2009) stress that girls growing up within postmodernity would consider their identity a perpetual state of becoming rather than a predetermined category to which to adhere. Diverse visual representations of girls and girlhoods are thus inevitable within postmodernity as they offer broad possibilities for girls to imagine and construct their identities. Popular girly visual culture activities such as DIY name bracelets and zine projects, shopping for name-brand clothing, and dress-up parties (Orenstein, 2011; Radner, 2011; Weida, 2013) reflect postmodern postfeminism's emphases on individualism and active and flexible identity construction, in turn providing a sense of individual agency. As girls make, choose, or shop for clothing and accessories, they simultaneously experience an individual agency development process because these activities enable them to playfully and flexibly construct, express, or reinvent who they are or who they want to be.

Second, postfeminism has been strategically juxtaposed with second-wave feminism, as it acknowledges previous feminist achievements, but as a "new moment of feminism" (Ringrose, 2013, p. 5), its worldview is constructed correspondingly to today's new concepts of sexual(ity) empowerment and gender relationships. Scholars in postfeminism (Genz & Brabon, 2009; Ringrose, 2013) maintain that today's girls and women, growing up in a more gender- and sexuality-liberated society, perceive sexuality and gender relationships differently than their second-wave feminist predecessors. Today's girls would argue that sexy is not sexist and that the male gaze can be pleasurable. They believe that feminists have accomplished their social goal of equal rights and opportunities and that it is now up to individuals to work for and be responsible for their own happiness. These postfeminist girls and women tend to focus on individual advancement through market-driven neoliberalism centered on privatization, entrepreneurialism, and financial and personal self-sufficiency. Radner (2011) adds that individualistic and apolitical beliefs justify and allow the retooling of the visual imagery previously denounced by feminists as a sign of gender bias, sexism, oppression, and exploitation into a site of individual, sexual, and financial empowerment.

Third, postfeminism has been perceived as anti-feminism, a backlash against feminism. Genz and Brabon (2009) reiterate that media representations of the backlash succeed "in firmly relegating women to their conventional gender roles as wives/mothers" (p.

57). This backlash encourages women to enjoy: being protected and treated like girls, traditional gender roles, and normative femininity and masculinity, as well as surrendering their careers to domestic responsibilities. These gender-binary preferences set women apart from men, in turn empowering the backlash postfeminists to claim their individual agency uniquely as women, mothers, and wives and to take back the domestic sphere "as a domain of female autonomy and independence" (p. 52). The backlash girly culture therefore advocates domesticity, heterosexuality, and traditional gender roles as a new femininity.

Female agency is a central concern of the three conceptualizations of postfeminism, yet its meaning and practice are controversial and contested. Feminist visual culture researchers (Bae, 2011; Genz & Brabon, 2009; Hains, 2012; Ringrose, 2013) continue to challenge and complicate the discourse of female agency involving the ideas of freedom, free choice, individual autonomy, and individual empowerment that today's girls and women believe they enjoy. Bae's (2011) and Hains' (2012) research indicates that the range of girl power created by popular visual culture is limited by a White, middle-class, and traditional nice-girl ethos. Because mainstream girl power is hegemonic, consumer-oriented, and mass-created for girls rather than girls' own creation, Hains questions the authenticity of the version of female agency it promotes. Ringrose (2013) contends that female agency constructed within a neoliberal consumer girl power culture has ignored critical aspects of power and privilege existing intersectionally across gender, race, and class locations. This exclusion has in turn fostered a false sense of *individual* creativity and empowerment and further assimilated girls into a dominant form of female agency informed by hegemonic imagery.

Through the literature review of the discourses of girly (visual) culture and postfeminist conceptualizations of gender divides and female agency, we have discussed a range of gender-related issues. Evidently, gender divides are embedded in and manifested through girly visual culture. Mass-produced girly visual culture continues to reinforce gender-specific merchandise and beliefs. This in turn discourages sharing of visual culture among different genders, limits opportunity for people to construct a gender identity from the bottom up, and may lead to a phobia of any unconventional gender expression. Girly visual cultures' emphases on femininity and masculinity; girl-only girly talk; sexualization of the female body, girly toys, and clothing; and girlish colors, emotions, fantasy, and speech have established visible female stereotypes. Postfeminist critiques further identify gender stereotypes, gender inequality, and questionable individual agency, yet such issues are not dire concerns among girly culture practitioners, especially outside academia (Ringrose, 2013). Moreover, while individual agency, individual empowerment, and girl heroes often appear in girly visual culture, feminist researchers (Genz & Brabon, 2009; Hains, 2012) continue to problematize girl heroes: they resemble White, heterosexual, young, and thin women; their lives are often packed with grave dangers; they may need to sacrifice romantic relationship in order to save the world; they remain attractive and sexy while engaging in malicious fights; they voluntarily tone down their intelligence and physical strengths in everyday life; and they are unreal. In short, the idealization of girl heroes may contribute to the oppression of certain gender expressions that disrupt a likeable or normative femininity or masculinity.

Children's Perceptions of Gendered Visual Culture

With a theoretical understanding of girly visual culture and the gender-related issues therein, we conducted a focus group discussion to empirically explore a group of preadolescent children's perceptions of and experiences with gendered visual culture. Munday (2013) argues that focus groups, defined as small group discussions centering on a specific topic and moderated by a researcher, are particularly effective for assessing the participants' experiences of and views about how the shared social world, including identity, is collectively constructed rather than pre-given and individualistic. Munday suggests that the researcher invites participants who have shared experiences to jointly and interactively construct feedback on a particular topic. The researcher then can use focus group data to improve a product or practice targeting the participant-like population.

To conduct a focus group for this study, one of the authors, Yichien, invited a group of 15 preadolescent children, nine girls and six boys, ages 8–14, from her private art studio to explore and discuss their experiences with and views of gendered visual culture and conceptions of gender identity. A majority of the children were Asian American while several children were Caucasians. These focus group participants knew each other through previous studio classes, had shared gendered and culture experiences, and were comfortable with group discussion. Yichien asked the children to write down five words or phrases signifying *girl/girly* and five words or phrases signifying *boy/boyish*. Then, the children discussed and collectively divided their written responses into several clusters based on similarities in their meaning. Eventually, with Yichien's help on naming two of the categories (i.e., Attributes and Connotations), the children organized their words or phrases into six categories: Attributes, Merchandise, Cosmetics, Connotations, Academic Subjects (Arts or STEM), and Sports. As the moderator-researcher in this focus group, Yichien's role was not to influence the children's thinking but to help them engage in group discussion, find images online when needed, and articulate the gendered experiences and meanings associated with the word or phrase. To move discussion forward, Yichien reminded the children to carefully listen to and reflect on the views of the word or phrase's original contributor. The children sometimes pointed out images they had found online to illustrate their ideas of gendered visual culture and identity. Occasionally, the children exercised a group vote to determine the meaning or category of certain terms.

From time to time, the children engaged in spirited conversations over certain ideas. For instance, while some children considered big muscles a boy's physical attribute, others argued that the phrase should be placed under the category of connotations, since it implied other meanings (e.g., strong, bully, etc.). In a discussion over the words cologne and perfume, the children wondered why these similar beauty products were named and advertised in gender-specific and gender binary ways. In an extended conversation, children pondered in which category they should place the color pink. A majority of the children affirmed that pink stood for girl/girly as they pointed out many pink dresses and pink-colored toys owned by the girls. Several girls also claimed that they liked to use a pink hue in their drawings, while the boys did not express such a tendency. However, one boy announced that his father, a male, wore pink shirts; therefore, he stated that the color pink should not be just for girls. Although other children acknowledged his example as an *exception*, in the end, the group decided that the color pink should symbolize girl/girly.

Attributes: Words indicate gender-specific attributes—long hair.
Merchandise: Words indicate specific brands—Victoria's Secret, Uggs, Toms, Starbucks, Little Pony, Barbie, Coach.
Cosmetics: Words indicate specific cosmetic product or service—makeup, nail polish, lipstick, manicure/pedicure, foundation, mascara.
Connotations: Words denote female stereotypes—color pink, emotional, chocolate, flowers, beauty sleep, cute, princesses, Paris.
Arts: Words indicate arts-related studies or materials—arts, craft, sewing, music, glitter.
Sports: Words related to sports—figure skating, dance.

Table 1. Children's words associated with girl and girly.

Attributes: Words indicate gender-specific attributes—big muscles, beard, abs.
Merchandise: Words indicate specific brands—Nike Elite, Jordan's, Hyperdunk, Transformers, Legos.
Cosmetics: Words indicate specific cosmetic products—hair gel, cologne, shaving cream.
Connotations: Words denote male stereotypes—color blue, toy cars, fighting, video games, dirt, saggy-pants, gang-activities, Mohawks, worms , A&W Teen Burgers.
STEM: Words indicate STEM-related studies—solar system, robotics, coding, engineer, math, rocket.
Sports: Words related to sports—basketball, body-building, karate, baseball, soccer, hockey.

Table 2. Children's words associated with boy and boyish.

The results of the focus group discussion (see Tables 1 and 2) offered us several insights into the children's conceptions and visualizations of gender identities and divides. While there was a discussion

on the gender category for the color pink, we noticed that there were no overlapping terms or images in the girl/girly and boy/boyish categories in the children's final responses. That is, the children ultimately did not assign any term or image to signify *both* girl and boy. Nor did they find any term or image too ambiguous to describe or depict as either girl or boy. Moreover, the children did not question whether there were gender identities other than girl and boy; that is, the children did not challenge the pre-assumed gender binary given by the moderator-researcher. As art educators, it was intriguing to see the children placing arts under girl/girly and STEM under boy/boyish. It is worth noting that the boys from the art studio did not argue that arts can also be or should be a boy/boyish activity. In our view, the children's responses displayed a gender divide and related gender inequality issues. The children did not speculate about gender identities and visual culture other than *girl/girly* and *boy/boyish*. This may indicate that the children were unaware of, resisted to engage in discussion about, or avoided showing their knowledge of or experience with a range of gender fluid gender identities and expressions. Their perceptions of gender as indicated by their categorizing of physical attributes, gender-coded beauty products, sports, academic subjects, merchandise, etc., showed adherence to gender stereotypes. As educators, we were especially concerned about academic-subject-based stereotypes because research has shown that such stereotypes have caused obstacles in children's pursuit of knowledge, skills, and careers (Fuller, Turbin, & Johnston, 2013).

The children's experiences and views of gendered visual culture and gender divides corroborate literature in child gender identity development. Gender identity has been traditionally divided into two socially acceptable norms: female and male (Woodward, 2004). Rosenberg and Thurber (2007) maintain that "even young children already reveal that they have internalized stereotypes related to gender" (p. 13). Adults and even teachers have used girl-versus-boy imagery to teach and reinforce concepts of gender opposition in social and educational settings (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013). Ivashkevich (2015) observes that in everyday contexts, girl-versus-boy toys "occupy different color-coded aisles in departments [reinforcing] gender boundaries and stereotypes" (p. 43). In school, teachers tend to talk in a soft voice to girls and use an adamant, prohibitive tone with boys, as well as encourage science projects in male-dominated classes and arts and fashion projects in girls' clubs (Fuller, Turbin, & Johnston, 2013). This gender socialization results in children naturalizing the binary gender divide from a young age.

Teaching Gendered Visual Culture

The exploration detailed above informed us that this group of preadolescent children is familiar with gendered visual culture and gender divides. As art educators, we wonder what pedagogical strategies we could use to overcome the gender divide and binary view of gender. Educators have tried to eradicate gender divides by toning down or avoiding gender-specific topics (e.g., eliminating princess- or knight-inspired stories) and supporting gender-neutral or agendered curriculum (Wardy, 2014). However, obliterating gender-specific content may lead to questionable gender-biased, gender-phobic, or gender-ignoring approaches in the art classroom (Rosenberg & Thurber, 2007). Urging educators to view gender categories as fluid, Rands (2009) maintains that "gender-complex teachers work with students to analyze at the micro level the ways in which gender is constantly being socially constructed in the classroom [which enables] teachers and students to take reflective action to reconstruct gender" (p. 426). Likewise, art educators have exemplified how gender-based projects such as collages of images of women and girl zines can inspire students to navigate complex gender categories (Lai, 2009; Rosenberg & Thurber, 2007; Weida, 2013). Other art educators (Buffington & Lai, 2011; Dittman & Meecham, 2006; Garber, 2003) add that through an intersectional, interactive, and inclusive approach, gender can be a safe and liberating element in art education. Their research demonstrates that students who are struggling with their gender identity can be empowered to assertively and safely speak of their gendered experiences and issues through open-ended visual presentations. Through such empowering art education, students can also develop genuine appre-

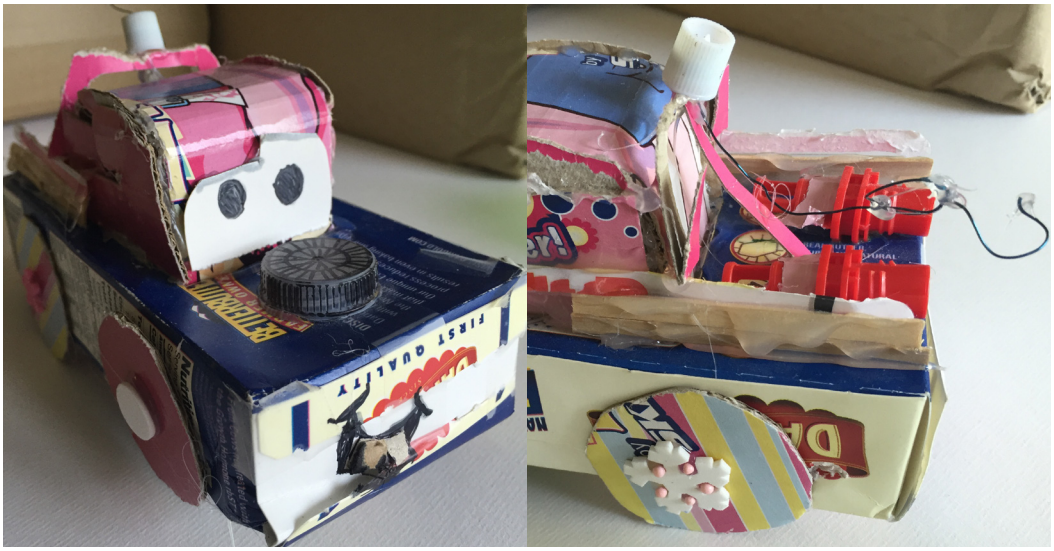

Figure 1. Mater. Created by Emilie, 5th Grade.

ciation of diverse gender expressions as exhibited through visual culture.

Taking these educators' advice, we agree with the value of gender-based pedagogy in art education as it allows students to creatively and safely explore and visualize diverse gender identities and expressions. The last segment of our exploratory study, therefore, was to incorporate gendered visual culture into the art classroom. Based on a classroom observation, we then identified pedagogical strategies for fostering gender-inclusive and playful learning that enhances imagination and creativity and empowers all students.

To this end, Yichien worked with the same group of children from the focus group to explore gendered visual culture projects. After the focus group, the children met one hour per week for four weeks for studio practice. During the first studio session, Yichien asked the children whether or not they had ever taken on any art project that was clearly associated with a specific gender. None of the children identified any project they had accomplished as specifically designed for a boy, a girl, or a gender fluid child. One girl asked why there had been no gender-specific art projects for them to explore. Intrigued by this question, the children began chatting excitedly about gender-specific art projects. Yichien then asked the children to propose a project they would like to do that may carry gender-specific connotations. The children reflected upon the ideas generated in the focus group and the fun activities they enjoyed doing and suggested projects such as making a dress, building a skate-park model, designing a car, designing a doll house for the characters Elsa and Anna from the movie *Frozen*, etc. Finally, the children decided on designing a car, primarily because they were familiar with the Disney movie *Cars*. They remembered various visual images of the cars in the movies, and their common interest in cars made them feel confident not only in designing their own cars but also in commenting on and appreciating others' cars.

In the car project, the children worked on their own designs or re-created, rather than copy, the Disney car models. The children spent about a month, or four classes, on the car project. In order to develop three-dimensional construction skills and meanwhile inspire their imaginations for the playful use of unusual materials and textures, Yichien encouraged the children to collect and use recycled materials and household items (e.g., cardboard boxes, spare wires, used toys, bottle caps) to build their cars. Through listening to the children talk about their cars and observing their car-making processes and in particular the finished work of one girl in the group, Emilie, we see the influence of girly and gendered visual culture on children's creativity. As shown in Figure 1, Emilie's *Mater* utilizes pink and bright colors along with big cute eyes to symbolize a *girl's* car or a car designed by a *girl*. Emilie paid close attention to the technical aspects such as the locations of the different mechanical gadgets and the scale of the multiple body parts. Emilie expressed that both beauty and a correct structure were the important concerns in her creative process. She color-coded her car to reflect her sense of identity as a girl, yet the overall design and shape of the car resembled a traditional masculine-looking

car. In short, we recognize girly aesthetics applied to Emilie's car, Emilie's attempt to express her identity through the car, and Emilie's perception of the car as a traditional, masculine construct. We consider this gender-mixed conceptualization and visualization of a car a possibility for children to disrupt or bridge the gender lines in the art classroom.

While working with the children on their cars, Yichien observed that a few children were longing for more opportunities to *build*. Following their curiosity, Yichien then encouraged the children to embark on another project, building a house. Similar to the car-making process, the children also collected and used recycled materials and household items (e.g., cardboard, cups, plastics, scrap fabric) to build the houses. Shown in Figure 2 is a close-up view of Emilie's porch, which she attached to her house. Her carefully built and decorated porch revealed her concerns of functionality and beauty. In building the porch, Emilie again expressed her identity as a girl by accentuating girly aesthetics and ethos through the visual and functional elements. Emilie referred functionality to both the basic structure of the house and the unique features designed for girls. For instance, she included a table and a bench on the porch, while some boys' houses displayed sports equipment and grills. She adorned the table with a silky, pastel-colored tablecloth and a red vase with paper flowers in it. This porch was an important addition for her as it provided a space for chatting and socializing and a bench on which she and her girl friends could sit close together. We can imagine that this cozy, neat, and feminine-looking porch welcomes girly talk and friendship. Emilie's porch exhibits traits of gender-specific artistic elements and girly ethos as described in our previous literature review.

Figure 2. The porch. Created by Emilie, 5th Grade.

These two gendered visual culture projects help us to identify the pedagogical strategies for fostering gender-inclusive and empowering learning; disrupting gender stereotypes and bridging divides; and encouraging creativity and playful use of materials. In these projects, we made gender an explicit topic for class discussion through which the children could consider the visual culture that they enjoy as not simply entertainment but entertainment with gender implications. With guidance from the teacher, this strategy enabled the children to engage in open and safe dialogue about gendered visual culture. For example, when the children were brainstorming the gender-specific art projects, they excitedly listed a number of projects based on the fun activities and movies they enjoyed. As the group discussion advanced, they further examined gender implications in those activities and movies. Their final creative works, such as *Mater* and the porch made by Emilie, while expressing an individual sense of gender identity, also display characteristics the children identified as crossing gendered boundaries.

Using a participatory, teacher-as-facilitator, content-based approach (Keifer-Boyd, 2007), we welcomed the children to collectively choose the themes for their projects. This strategy empowered them to be active thinkers, to select projects and learn as a group based on self-selected common interests, and to willingly explore the themes and acquire new knowledge. For instance, as the children were con-

sidering and making the car project, they were eager to help each other to search for ideas and learn more about car design; they also further extended their discussion to include topics of the history of the North American car industry and how the construction of highways affects small towns.

Furthermore, following a nonjudgmental feminist approach (Fuller, Turbin, & Johnston, 2013; Rosenberg & Thurber, 2007), when the children selected car and house projects, we did not question their ability to build convincing cars or houses or to simply complete the projects. Nor did we critique their choices as embodying stereotypes. The children considered cars to be a boys' subject. Although we acknowledged to ourselves that this is a gender stereotype, our goal was to undo the stereotype by encouraging all children to design their cars according to their ability, imagination, and aesthetic sensibilities. This strategy released the children from producing a stereotypical boys' car and inspired them to create cars crossing gender boundaries. For example, Emilie's car in Figure 1 is equipped with special gadgets (e.g., mechanical wires, a pair of binoculars). Her work exhibits both girly-culture-based feminine aesthetics and the masculine technical knowledge and skills usually considered the domain of boys. Because of this crossing of gender boundaries, when the children viewed each others' work, their focus was on the creativity, fun, and originality embodied by the cars rather than the cars' gender connotations. Through designing their own cars and houses and seeing others' designs in cross-gender or gender-mixed styles, the children may have changed their assumption that designing a car or house is a boys' job; they may also have gained new artistic ideas on how to design their projects not in a traditionally masculine or feminine fashion.

Conclusion

This exploratory study has offered us a number of insights into girly visual culture, gender divides and stereotypes, and preadolescent children's perceptions of gendered visual culture. It allowed us to try out gendered visual cultural projects as a means of fostering gender-inclusive, playful, and empowering learning. These children's projects demonstrated that they were able to use their imaginations freely, playfully engage in art making, and produce visual culture and new knowledge across gender boundaries. On the basis of our study, we conclude the paper with the following thoughts.

Feminist scholars (Hains, 2012; Ivashkevich, 2009; Ringrose, 2013) criticize girly visual culture as being full of gender connotations, contradictions, stereotypes, and inequality. However, because we recognize the popularity and significance of girly visual culture in our students' lives, rather than eliminating it from art classroom, we suggest teachers turn it into gender-inclusive learning. Gender-inclusive curriculum and learning processes allow students to express, discover, and rediscover themselves (Brown & Roy, 2007) and their creativity, and simultaneously undo bias against diverse gender identities, thereby strengthening students' own self-esteem and facilitating alliances with their peers. We also suggest teachers utilize gendered content and visual culture in a playful and exploratory way. This may inspire students to step outside their familiar art and gender zones. They then can explore new art materials, new knowledge/skills with their peers, and diverse creativities and gender expressions. In doing so, teachers can transform the art classroom into a safe and engaging space.

Finally, the gendered visual culture projects in our study can help students to develop individual agency. As mentioned in our literature review of girly (visual) culture and postfeminist conceptualizations of feminist agency, feminist scholars (Genz & Brabon, 2009; Ringrose, 2013) question whether today's girls, by consuming ready-made, mass-produced, and gender-coded visual culture, are able to authentically build individual agency. These scholars advocate individual empowerment through collective investigation and critique of gendered visual culture as well as active and flexible identity construction projects. In our study, when students collectively reflected on gender implications in their visual culture projects, they also began developing the ability to question gender connotations, a skill that can turn them into critical participants in and creators of visual culture from a young age. Moreover, creating visual culture projects using unconventional materials and emphasizing

individual creativity can motivate students to try new ideas and art styles corresponding to individual ability and imagination, in turn cultivating their capacity to become resourceful makers and active thinkers, rather than passive consumers, of visual culture.

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